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Sonnets to Sidney Lanier

by Clifford Anderson Lanier A

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Sonnets to Sidney Lanier

Sonnets to Sidney Lanier
And Other Lyrics by Clifford Anderson Lanier

Edited, with an Introduction, by Edward Howard Griggs

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

"God gave us our relatives; we thank the Lord He let us choose our friends," the modern scoffer has it—indicating the deeper significance in the spirtual relationship freely chosen. When, however, to the deep bond of blood is added the bond of friendship: when the fine spiritual relationship crowns the family affection: then indeed is the union rare and wonderful. Such was the love of Clifford and Sidney Lanier—the love that found its finest literary expression in the sonnets that follow.

In the Lanier brothers was the best blood of the old Southland, developing to fine, chivalrous manhood, touched with that tenderness that crowns the man with the woman's refinement of feeling and appreciation. Intimately together in boyhood and early college days, they fought through the splendid losing fight of the war, much of the time in close association. Sidney suffered captivity, while Clifford was shipwrecked, but fortunately escaped that period of imprisonment, amid the horrors of Point Lookout prison, that broke Sidney's health and perhaps

caused his sadly early death. Devoted patriots, keeping faith with their dear lost cause, the brothers had in common that generosity of view and magnanimity of spirit that made them accept the larger American ideals and coöperate in building the New South that is part of the new nation.

Younger by two years and only less gifted than his marvelous brother, it seemed to Clifford, in the bitter time of reconstruction, that his duty was to put aside, as avocation, his longings for a literary career, and accept the less attractive sphere of business life. It was necessary for some one of the family to shoulder the material problem, and Clifford cheerfully accepted it, that Sidney might have the fuller freedom. A letter of their father to Clifford, under date of June 23rd, 1878, gives the situation of Clifford's life at the age of thirty-four:

"What you say relative to the distinction other men have won in the world brings to me an almost painful sense of your sacrifices. I do indeed daily think of you as a hero, who has had the courage to repress aspirations for distinction,

with the view of benefiting others. On the notion that what could not be well helped must be borne (for you and I have been environed with circumstances hard to deal with) I have reluctantly acquiesced in your continued uncongenial vocation. But the fact of acquiescence was only possible, first on the idea that you were thereby rendering important aid to dependent relatives, and, second, in the hope that every succeeding year would somehow bring about a change. . . . I have not been without fear that in the midst of your brave work you have had moments of repining."

If there were moments of regret, the sacrifice was made gladly and continued bravely. Though Clifford might not wed the muse, she remained a sister to him, and his output in the avocation of letters was significant and worthy.

In Sidney Lanier's heroic struggles with ill-health and material difficulties, there were many times when he had to call for help to the brother who stood behind his aspirations—calls so pathetic as to bring tears to the eyes as one reads them in the tender brother letters. To these ap-

peals, made confidently, if reluctantly, the response was always swift and glad. Thus some of the laurel is due the one who helped make possible the full-crowned song.

When the material help was sent, it was transfigured, not only by the spirit in which it was given, but by an accompanying sonnet, voicing, beyond the power of prose, the brother love. It is these sonnets, kept lovingly by SidneyLanier, and valued highly by him as poetry as well as for love's sake, that are here printed for the first time, with two exceptions; one having appeared in the *Independent* and one in the New York *Times,* shortly after Clifford Lanier's death. Sincere, direct, beautiful, and weighted with thought, they have at times a Shakespearian quality, reminding us of that unmatched cycle of songs of friendship. Brief and few as these sonnets are, it were a pity should they not live for a larger circle, not only for beauty's sake, but to strengthen our faith in love.

The lyrics following these sonnets are selected from the little volume *Apollo and Keats,* published privately in 1902. Chiefly personal in

character, delicate in music, always sincere expression of thought and mood, they belong with the sonnets as a memorial expressing the spirit and character of one of nature's gentlemen, generous, gifted, fine and true—Clifford Lanier.

EDWARD HOWARD GRIGGS.

SONNETS TO SIDNEY LANIER

I

SINCE corn hath "increment above, below;"
Extracteth life from wind and sun and rain,
Disdaining naught by which to germ and grow,
And yearning ever for its golden grain:
So canst thou never by the subtlest art
Discover whence its larger growth hath come;
To which, or root or stem or other part,
Its strength imparted is by all or some.
Thou canst not tell the aid it hath of each—
The glow of Heaven or Earth's warm-clasping
mould.
Then rest thee well content: thy gospel teach
In tuneful numbers worth far more than gold.
This doubtful merit is the meed I gain:
True poets grow by "help" of sun and rain.

(February 20, 1875. To thy call for help, received today.)

The editor is responsible for a few verbal or metrical corrections in certain of the sonnets—changes in most instances indicated by the author.

II

My gentle tiller of right noble fields,
Thou tuneful shepherd of the oaten reed,
How far above the false capricious yields
Of swarthy delvers in the mines of greed
Is thy full gleaning of the poet's corn,
Thy shepherding of melodies divine,
Thy spiritual tilth, whereof is born
A harvest satisfying, rich, benign!
What opulence of fickle treasured gold
Can with thy real gain its wealth compare?
Foul noisome weeds doth *that* accursed mould,
Fair luscious maize doth *this* soul's garden bear.
Then speed thy husbandry with Music's art—
Thou hast for garner all the world's great heart!

(March 16, 1875).

III

Thou art not plagued with any cares of life—
Infesting worries of this earthly sense;
For thou canst pipe to peace, contending strife,
And win the love of chafing malcontents
By wise, benignant largesse of thy song:
Thou makest of all foes thy vassals good.
If cares assail, intent to do thee wrong,
Thy spirit's powers, like armies in a wood,
Beat fine alarums of such melting tone,
And troop unto thy call in such array,
That ere they muster, all thy cares are gone,
Their stings, their weapons thrown in flight away.
No hate can with thee live, thou gracious King
Of harmony and high imagining!

(March 17, 1875.)

IV

Since thou art King, and I thy subject Prince,
To do thee homage bound by love and pact,
I but the simplest loyalty evince
To pay thee dues of fancy and good act.
How can I ever render thee thy due?
What cannot counted be, cannot be paid.
Infinity, acquit by quittance true,
Is only by infinitude defrayed.
Thus friends in strangest enmity are met:
My loyalty and love forever strive,
This one to pay, that to increase the debt,
What one would kill, the other would revive:
But 'tis no war of Ghibelline and Guelph—
Each fain would aid his foe against himself.

V

Thou magic breather of the silver flute,
Arion skillful of our later time—
Enchanting men by thy enchanted lute,
And driving to thy yoke of lusty rhyme
Wild sea-shapes strange and deepest mysteries,
In that all boundless ocean of thine art;
Who, coming to thy called consistories,
Straight do thy bidding and espouse thy part;
So that thou buoyest high upon the wave
To Havens sweet, in Fame's proud glories drest—
Behold, already thy tamed coursers lave
Their shining figures in Fame's port of rest;
And thou, wave-beaten bard, in kingly form,
Art promontoried high above all storm!

VI

When in the blaze of honor-giving eyes
Thy fame hath raised thee to a dizzy height,
Wilt thou forget the sweet confederacies
That fill our past with such a tender light?
Wilt thou erase from that full page, thy heart,
The careless copies childhood splotched thereon,
Or those that boyhood wrote with fairer art,
Or those unfading later lists, whereon
The perilous companionship of war
Inscribed its roll of brothers' courtesies—
Infractions of low self-defending law,
Sanctions of love and selfless chivalries?
All in my credit, thou art sure to set;
All that's thy due, is all thou wilt forget.

VII

Never can I forget one wintry night
Of seeming endless cold and weary march:
Thy soul panoplied, serene and bright,
As conquering hero through triumphal arch,
Walked resolute himself, and giving aid
To me who faltered on the trying way
And weak complaints continually made.
Thou, leader firm of thy brave soul's array,
Didst cheer my ever drooping forces on
With helpful arm and hopeful-ringing voice,
Till night despaired, and pæan-singing morn
At last bade nature and our souls rejoice.
Of helpful love, love's gratitude arises—
No night, no dark, and dawn hath no surprises!

VIII

Antonio.—His word is more than the miraculous harp.
Sebastian.—He hath raised the wall, and houses too.
—Shakespeare, *The Tempest.*

WHAT wonder that thy voice is true of sound,
Its measures fitting there where deftly thrown;
For Music walls a Theban city round,
And thou art Master Architect of tone.
What wonder that thy music ravisheth,
When its own harmonies it doth rehearse;
For then thine Art Creative lavisheth
On these the subtle spirits of thy verse.
Amphion, thus, thou art, of higher mould:
He rounds a mart; thou dost a temple make
Wherein thou worshipest—thy penance told
With flute and song for dear Religion's sake.
In faithful verse thou tellest o'er thy creed;
Thy life—all music—is a hymn in deed.

OTHER LYRICS

LOVE'S RESERVE

To Wilhelmein

To *Her*—my lovely and steadfast comrade—whose approval has ever been my most welcome laurel (Love's reserve yielding to the lures of Art) I offer this volume.

The poet, raptured, gazing wifeward, said:
Thou art the self of Beauty to my sight;
Thy figure shapen is in lines of light
From dainty feet to glory-crowned head;
With perfect rhyme those lithe arms, upward spread,
A pulsing couplet form in rhythm right;
And o'er thy bosom drape the vestments white,
Tender as words by music vesturéd.
If verse now had the graphic warmth of sun,
If Love *could* body what his heart would hide,
If thou wert less than wifely vestaled nun,
Dear love of thee might yield to Art's fond pride,
And, dressed in poet's breath, these veils aside,
Thou should'st be wife and poem merged in one.

HYMN TO THE GREAT ARTIST

Watery seas He folds in a vesture of cloud,
And the hearts of their shells He molds,
Till these utter their multiple music aloud,
And rapture of speech bursts the clod that He holds.

For dumbness is not of the work of the Lord:
Star spaces and far feel the breath of His flute.
Day breathes to the night, night fugues all abroad,
Where far-streaming star-beams are strings of His lute.

THE AMERICAN PHILOMEL

Ah sweet—our mocking bird,
  The many-tongued!
From highest top of yon church pinnacle,
Whose glittering point thus quivers into song,
  His voice!
The church's faith and love
  Now seem to blossom in
Nor flower nor odor, but in sound.
Gone is the day, passed with its Sabbath forms:
The zeal of Sunday-school in children's eyes,
Blazing to kindle bright the farthest isles,
Now fades in children's dreams this summer
    night,
And yields their fane to loveliness of song.

  Balm-breathing harmony,
What tenderness is thine!
  The air is all ethereal;
The moonlight, soft affection's sweetest smile;
The fragrant trees are Beauty's ministers,
And dewy lawns lie tearfully adream.

Sweet, bird-blown flute,
Thou weavest poesy and lore in one—
Religion, history and song,
Wild-flowers and wheat.
An Indian maiden with the heart of Ruth,
Withheld by tribal hate from joy and love,
And pining faithfully,
Might utter such a plaint as thine
Now is. Anon,
Some antique Miriam's triumph swells
In rising, crescent, cymbal-clashing notes,
Joyous, outringing as a peal of bells.

An alabaster box of Music's nard
Upon the feet of Love thou shatterest.
These drops of dew are fragrant with its sweet;
These pendent boughs seem blessing hands;
Out of grim shadow, benedictions come;
Moonlight like Christ's forgiveness beams:
Thy heavenly throatings whisper to the soul
Undying faith, supernal,
Love eternal.

FOREST ELIXIRS

Inhaling strength with every breath
Soft blown across the mountain way,
I stroll where autumn's crimson death
And Summer's resurrection say

The annual rhyme of death and life.
Smooth winds the road o'er covert glade,
On upward slope, by varying strife,
For mastery, of light and shade.

Here greenery hath conquered all,
And dominates a world of love;
Yon distant hill is mighty thrall
Of mastering blueness throned above.

Here find I quiet rest I seek
Far from the turbulence of men,
And mildly importune the meek
Faun-voices of the Woodland glen.

Where think not that the woods are still:
For whomso'er can overhear,
Each runlet speaketh, and each hill—
A music hid from carnal ear.

The dumb rocks hint their history;
And myriad winged things float past,
With messages of mystery
Sent from the dim, leaf-shadowed vast.

All tender moss that steadfast clings
To warm the oak-root, mantle wise,
Some answer has to questionings,
Repose for restless subtleties.

If I would staunch an anguish sore
That contumely's thrust hath made,
Or into wounds mild healing pour,
Away from battle-fields of trade,

I walk amid these leafy balms—
Wood distillations magic breeds—
Upborne upon the upheld palms
Of elfin greenwood Ganymedes;

And learn how thought is kin to prayer,
That grace, as juices from earth's sod,
Flows through the veins of spirit, where
Man's soul doth feel the touch of God.

DEATH IN LIFE

'Tis eight o'clock in the morning,
The culminating moon at west;
A perfect day from its dawning,
As e'er maternal night expressed.

The soft wind blows with thrilling zest,
And all around, in earth and sky,
Blithe sunshine makes it manifest
God's thought to-day is ecstasy.

If wine expressed from heavenly fruit
Had winnowed through cloud-filters laced,
And had been miracled to suit
Some finer sense than mortal taste,

It might give life, as does this air—
Apollo's strings were not more tense;
September murmurs everywhere
With thrills of faint-heard instruments,

As if the sounds of all past days,
Ascending through the scale of time,
Had lost all accents save of praise,
And reached the height of perfect rhyme.

The mime-bird sings, outspreads his wings
  On wavy curves from tree to tree;
Unruffling by his airy swings,
  And by his carol's melody

The lake of grass or aught it holds.
  Now close he whirs o'er yonder head:
Unsprings his foe—one stroke! He folds
  His wings—the lilting voice lies dead.

O crystal Source of perfect thought,
  This comfort in my heart distil
From bleeding Nature, parable-fraught:
  That death's not ill, but Wisdom's will!

WILHELMEIN

A Portrait

A PATIENT sadness in the lovely face
That melts to tenderness within the eyes,
Now dark, now bright, as in the dew-drop lies
A shadow brightening in a sunny place;

Shy dimples in the cheeks that come and go
As laughter rises from the brimming heart;
Soft folds of lustrous hair; lips half apart
As if a kiss escaped and left them so;

One fair hand thrown aside in careless gesture
To grasp the rose, down-fallen in her vesture—
The rose is passing sweet, yet lacks it grace
To keep me longer from that sweeter face.

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA

(On Presenting a Tea Urn)

LIFE's haply come, my Dear, for you and me,
To just this stage of cozy afternoon tea;
We've tasted blithe youth's many a fête,
'Tis sweeter now—the *duo* tête-à-tête.

If e'er the boiling urn was brewed too hot,
Love's soothing curd would cool the silvern pot;
Life tenders some its wine, unlike mine, thine,
Whose tenderness makes life a draught divine.

Infusing, steeping love in our lives, Dear,
Thy fellowship extends a daily cheer.
Spiceful as Orient leaf, thy sweetness lures
Like fruit of island bowers; thy charm endures.

May life continue, Sweet, for you and me,
One glorious chat o'er deep-drawn, fragrant tea!

THE HAPPIEST

If now the Master of the feast should stand,
Seeking the happiest at life's festal board,
To crown him King with garlands, and to hand
To him the joy-brimmed, silver, carven gourd

Of happiness to quaff—whose should it be?
His, rich in pleasures gathered from all parts
Of earth? Nay, nay, the happiest is he
Who garners joy from joys of others' hearts.

TO MRS. VINNIE REAM HOXIE

On Leaving Montgomery, December 16, 1888

Fame, honor and remembrance live in time
For those who worthily have sung or wrought;
One name is chapleted with blooms of rhyme,
Another festooned o'er with braids of thought.
Essaying fame, the mailéd soldier stamps
And prints an image rude of cruel deeds;
Forgiving Love forgets his frowning camps,
And writes in moss her loveliest creed of creeds.
To us you bind yourself with triple chain—
Sculptor, poet, above all else a friend.
Thus recollection strives to soothe our pain,
And would with tenderness our grief amend—
To all the world she speaks in shapes of Art;
For us she rhymes our souls with her own heart!

BENVENUTO CELLINI

Thou, sculptor, bravo, craftsman cunning, bold,
Musician, poet, man of many parts,
Thy time's most fervid lover of such arts
As body forth rare forms in bronze and gold;
Epitome of them who leave the old,
And ever seek fresh ventures of new marts;
Born where the flowing Arno streams and darts,
To warm in sun his flower-dipped waters cold:

Thou art the type of bankrupt souls' sad loss,
Who come so close to fortune and true gain;
Like fallen angels shut from out Heaven's gate
They miss Elysium by a coin's toss,
And glory, straitly missed, redoubles pain:
Thine art, Christ-touched, had been immaculate!

THE MEN BEHIND THE BOOKS

From cabined walls of close-ranged, dusty shelves,
Whereon the effigies of great thoughts are
In print, mine inner sense would break the bar
And find the treasury of their inmost selves—
Shakspeare's, while visioning midsummer elves
With queen Titania in her wee nut car;
With dreaming poets range from star to star,
Or plunge in caverns plumbing science delves:

To gaze beyond this pale on Keats' dear soul—
Endymion 'mong the stars of Beauty's sky;
On Milton's, hearing heavenly battles roll;
Through Wordsworth's, know each tender floweret's eye:
With humble workers, study moss and clod,
And with brave singers, feel the breath of God.

METRIC GENESIS

THE poet brings not something out of naught:
He breathes into a dream: Lo!—Adam—
Thought!

Dumb lonesome thought for want of music weeps,
And rhythm—Eve—discloses as he sleeps.

Whence God does set his seal upon the pair—
Speech, Eden is, with Eve and Adam there.

TRANSFORMATION

THE humblest life that lives may be divine:
Christ changed the common water into wine.
Star-like comes Love from out the magic East,
And Life, an-hungered, finds his fast a feast.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Dreaming along the haunted shore of time,
And mad that sea's Æolian song to sing,
He found the shell of beauty—rhythmic rhyme—
And fondly deemed its sheen a living thing.

KEATS AND FANNY B——

A STAR beheld an image in a spring—
His own beams robed in heavenly vesturing.
Out-burned his fire and faded from the sky:
The clear earth-rill purled on indifferently.

THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

We know not the very heart of the lute;
We only hear the beat of music's wings—
The garment's rustle as it shaping clings
About the bodied soul—whether low flute
Or trumpet's large, world-full, resounding bruit
That summons to enchant the state of kings.
We hear the organ's far-drawn murmurings,
But from the holiest Holy all is mute:

Maybe we host an angel unaware.
We cherish knowledge, tongues and prophecies,
Forgetful how these vanish into air,
Whereof they frame their winning mysteries.

Love, love alone, in music, life and art,
Remains the angelic friend-guest of the heart.

HIS SILENT FLUTE

To Sidney Lanier, 1881

Each life is tinct with joyousness and pain:
A web of measured silences and sound,
In subtle plan of patterns deftly wound;
And with a heart of love, is Music. Rain,
Sunshine, are tides of one wavering Main,
Whose throbbing bears the prow of life to port.
E'en on the parapet of Hatred's fort,
Some bruiséd violet of love will fain
Its banner wave for Brotherhood and God.
Such alternates do fleck the whole vast round—
A star, a comet, lost, is a planet found.
This comfort would I take from star and clod—
I hear it murmuring from his silent flute:
Death is not death, but life that's briefly mute.

TO A POET DYING YOUNG

Sidney Lanier

Much like some mountain-springing crystal rill,
Or burgeoning of trees that bravely climb
The sunniest crag of all; now like the mime
Of mock-bird trilling gaily, then death-still,
As if his mate-bird's answer hushed his trill,
Or some god whispered in his ear, " 'Tis time
For holy meditation,"—so thy rhyme
Did falter, seeking beauty and love's will.

Too short, ah, sadly short, thy days for song,
For work, for prayer, for far-envoyaging thought!
Ah me! no time nor strength for righting wrong,
Thy soul well knew man's apathy had wrought.
Thou couldst but trill, as thou didst limp along,
High hints of music's heaven, thy soul had caught.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To All Who Love Sidney Lanier

As in one planet-mocking globe of dew
May lucent glow the full-spanned arc of blue:

Since one clear stroke of Time's star-guiding bell
Unending happiness or woe may tell:

Since came a world of light from just one word
Of God, and all the stars of morning heard:

Then let one murmured word from me express
A fervent round of grateful tenderness.

Gold in the morn; silver shine at noon;
Gold after noon; 'tis twilight now.
Dusk wanes the day; old voices croon;
And pales the aureole on age's brow.
Fitful, the flame upon the cottage fire
Burns like the heart of chill desire.
The limbs, with ache, like worn-out timbers creak;
And scarce the smoke may climb the chimney peak.
Dim sounds of uproar that the Present makes
Come through the window; Memory fonder shakes
Old sides to laughter and old hearts to tears.
All brave delights of youth give way to fears.
Grandchildren romp not with the glee of yore.
A sadness never felt before
Creeps in the mind. The hand clasps not as strong.
New songs sing not as that old song—
Clear with the truth
Of candid youth,
And sweet forsooth

As the limpid, twinkling sheen of the Romance well,
Or sweetheart-gospels lovers tell,
As truest chime of the marriage bell,
As loveliest child-bloom ever fell
From gardens where home-blisses grow
And joys of heaven with angels dwell
And Love's uncankered roses blow.
Cometh now life's afterglow:
O'er yonder sun the clouds drift slow,
Like sleepy birds that seek the nest,
On drowsy-moving wings almost at rest—
So smooth their flight into yon darkling West.

Gold in the morn; silver shine at noon;
Gold after noon; new soft lights beam,
Whereof the heart of youth may merely dream:
Pearl, amber, lucent sard are in yon gleam.
In circles ever moveth life around,
Without decline; eve puts no term nor bound;
Age at old portals is await
For that new scene beyond the gate.
This little grain of life was sweet: how grand
The planetary round of God's new land!

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